Architecture: expectations and reality

Most people coming into architecture have their own personal ideas on what architecture is like. Some, like me, had preconceived notions that it was about building or making things. Some thought it was all about drawing. Some came into architecture thinking it would make them rich. But almost all of us had our expectations turned on our heads. Just about everyone I know who came into architecture has said that it is not what they expected. None of them were wrong (except maybe the part about being rich) but they weren't entirely right either. Architecture, as we now know, is a complex mix of just about every discipline imaginable. We knew it was going to be hard, but none of us knew just how hard it would be.

Horror stories about staying up for weeks on end, living on caffeine and rarely seeing the light of day seemed like exaggerated fables by overdramatic seniors, but we were quick to realise that it was not a tall tale. Reality had begun to sink in. we sloughed and we pushed and in the end, we came out clutching our hard earned degrees and thanking God we survived. The big question now came: "Now what?" some of us decided to continue our studies straight away, some decided to take a breather. Many decided to plunge into the working world. Portfolios were glossed up and printed, résumés sent out. Rumour had it that in the dismal economy of the day, getting a job in architecture was hard. But surprisingly, offers came in quickly and jobs secured. Quickly we realised that the work we put in during our studies did not really affect our job prospects. A regular dean-lister had the same chance of landing a job as a graduate with a significantly lower GPA.

Most of us were raring to go, to see how our studies would be put into practice, to see if maybe, our initial expectations about architecture would prove to be true in the working world. Personally, I relished the idea that I'd finally be able to really affect and help people, bring about change through architecture. Idealistic and naive, no doubt. Different firms had different work cultures, and so whenever we met up the question 'how's work?' was enough to fill hours of conversation. Hours were long and work was hard. Well, that was nothing new.

We all agreed that working taught us to be more efficient in carrying out tasks, and we learnt how to focus on important parts and not so much on the nitpicky details that would be sorted out later. Many of us were in awe of our bosses, how they managed, with a few swift flicks of their pens, to solve design problems that to us had seemed impossible. If only one day I'd be that good at architecture, we thought. It seemed like a tall order but we still had the option of going back to school to continue our studies. Maybe that way, we'd learn what it took to be like them. Better decision makers, with a much deeper well of knowledge to pull from, better versed at the intricacies of

architectural practice. Yes, studying seemed like a good idea. Some of us were getting disillusioned about the practice, where it seemed like it was not about the people, but about the money. Architecture was just a business, and like most businesses, making profit was their Raison d'être.

So we went back to school, fresh faced again and thirsty. But although working had taught us about efficiency, speed, and teamwork; to a certain extent, it also accustomed us to being workers. Directives were duly carried out, and feedback was immediate (and sometimes scathing). Going back to school meant that all decisions were up to us, with no boss to tell us what to do and how to do it. Feedback came slowly, with lecturers barely able to attend to the large number of students. Getting back into a steady groove took some time. What we quickly learned was that part 1 was a stroll in the park, a breeze compared to part 2. But here we are, and we'll strive to survive.

If anything, being in architecture so far has taught us an extremely wide set of skills that not many other degree holders can say they picked up. We have a year left, a year of learning, a year to discover finally if architecture can live up to our expectations, or if it will turn into a different reality altogether. It's a long, bumpy road ahead./_{aM vol 24 issue 5}